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ABSTRACT

Fifty instructional modules designed to improve newspaper reading skills were field tested in this study. During a 50-day period, modules were used by Wilkes County, Georgia teachers as they saw fit in seventh, eighth, and ninth grade classes primarily for 338 students with poor reading skills. In summary, the effectiveness of the instructional modules for significantly improving newspaper reading skills of junior high school students, including those whose general reading skills were two or more years below grade level, again was demonstrated. (RB)

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# An Analysis of Modular Instruction of Newspaper Reading Skills to Poor Readers in Junior High School

A Research Report to ANPA Foundation

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A set of fifty instructional modules designed to improve newspaper reading skills were field tested in this study. The modules were revisions of a set that had produced highly significant gains in a prior field test.[1] Identifying main points, interpreting causes of events, and predicting consequences of actions are three typical illustrations of the objectives.

Each module includes specific behavioral objectives and suggested teaching procedures to be followed. Modules are not sequential, but can be selected by teachers to meet specific needs of given classes, even to the point of selecting a single objective and its appropriate procedures from within a module. No time requirement is specified; teachers can continue use of a module until satisfied with student performance. Teachers must select appropriate content from daily newspapers for use with the modules. Subsequent to this field test the modules were published.[2]

During a fifty day period, modules were used by Wilkes County, Georgia teachers as they saw fit in seventh, eighth, and ninth grade classes primarily for students with poor reading skills. Teachers were aware that tests measuring all eighteen objectives would be used to evaluate student achievement. Each student had access in class to his own copy of the current Augusta Chronicle, a morning daily newspaper, which was given him by that newspaper.[3]

Wilkes County, in northeast Georgia, is primarily a rural dairy farming area. All public school students attend school in Washington, the county seat town. Per capita annual income is typical of the rural South. Public school students as a group tend to come from lower income families. All black students attend public schools. With few exceptions, black teachers comprise the upper income group of their race. Many white students of middle or higher income levels attend a private school organized when the public schools were racially integrated. The white public school population therefore tends to come predominately from lower income families.

The average reading level of Wilkes County students is almost one year below national norms, approximately the same as the state as a whole. Since students from lower income families tend to have lower school achievement, the reading level of public school students in both the county and the state probably is somewhat depressed by the tendency of higher income students to attend private school.

Three hundred thirty-eight students in grades seven, eight, and nine were included in this study. These students, about half of the total enrollment, were selected as being those of lower academic achievement. According to school records, only twenty-one read at national average grade level. This group had low academic achievement, and were

identified by teachers as not reading effectively in practice. One hundred sixty-seven were two or more years below grade level. Excluded from the study were students of higher academic ability who took other courses, and students who transferred in or out for whom scores on one or more of the reading test, pretest, or posttest were not available.

Tests used to measure newspaper reading skills were the ANPA Foundation Newspaper Tests, Forms J-1 and J-2, as pretest and posttest respectively. These tests were developed by Educational Testing Service. Each consists of a test booklet of thirty multiple choice items and a specimen newspaper upon which the questions are based. The specimen newspapers include all major components of a standard daily newspaper except for comic strips and also are at comparable levels of reading difficulty of standard dailies. The tests have been shown by ETS to discriminate between those who have and have not had instruction in newspaper use. The two forms are, of course, of equivalent levels of difficulty.

Pretests were administered at the beginning of fall quarter, 1972. The modules and daily newspapers were used for fifty instructional days during standard class periods in whatever sequence and to whatever extent that teachers desired. The posttest was administered immediately following the fifty days of instruction.

The difference between pretest and posttest means at each of the three grade levels was highly significant. Table 1 depicts gains that were significant in thirteen of the sixteen class sections. Following instruction, many ninth graders scored approximately as high as do average senior high school students nationally who also have had instruction in newspaper use. Of these eighty-four ninth graders, only two read at grade level on national norms on a standardized reading test while fifty-eight read two or more years below grade level. Seventh and eighth graders remained somewhat below national expectations in newspaper reading skills among instructed students but not nearly so far below as they were in general reading skills. Results of use of the instructional modules for improving newspaper reading skills were highly encouraging.

Students were categorized into four groups as to standardized reading test scores and results compared among groups. Groups were: (1) at or above grade level on national norms, (2) up to one year below grade level, (3) one to two years below grade level, and (4) two or more years below grade level. No significant difference in gain occurred between any two reading levels. Within the seventh grade, the low scores of the group of least able readers appeared to demonstrate that the modules and newspapers

TABLE 1
Significance of Gain by Class

| Class | Gain | t | Level of Significance |
|---|---|---|---|
| 7-1 | .38 | .42 | NS |
| 7-2 | 1.63 | 1.90 | NS |
| 7-3 | 2.28 | 2.48 | .05 |
| 7-4 | 2.27 | 3.29 | .005 |
| 7-5 | 2.74 | 3.65 | .005 |
| 7-6 | 2.25 | 3.31 | .005 |
| 7-7 | 2.61 | 4.02 | .0005 |
| 8-1 | 2.12 | 3.12 | .005 |
| 8-2 | .68 | .71 | NS |
| 8-3 | 2.28 | 2.81 | .01 |
| 8-4 | 2.81 | 4.01 | .0005 |
| 8-5 | 4.00 | 4.65 | .005 |
| 9-1 | 1.94 | 2.31 | .05 |
| 9-2 | 3.00 | 3.57 | .005 |
| 9-3 | 5.19 | 4.90 | .0005 |
| 9-4 | 4.18 | 5.43 | .0005 |

are not "teacher proof." Nearly two-thirds of these seventh graders were in two of the three class sections that did not gain significantly; both were taught by the same teacher. Better readers consistently outperformed poorer readers, of course, but did not demonstrate significantly more gain. Ordinarily, instruction widens the gap between more and less able students. Since the twenty-one students with average or better reading ability had not been highly successful academically in past, no generalization to results to be anticipated of typical adequate readers is warranted. It seems likely that the somewhat better gains of ninth graders is related to their attitudes toward school. Many ninth graders were old enough to "drop out"

and were in school voluntarily. Seventh and eighth graders were, with few exceptions, required to attend. Those with very negative attitudes toward school were thus included at these two grade levels. Table 2 includes results by reading level for each grade level.

TABLE 2
Gain by Reading Level by Grade

| Grade | Level One | Level Two | Level Three | Level Four |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Seven | 2.31 | 3.08 | 2.16 | 1.28 |
| Eight | 2.33 | 3.13 | 1.68 | 2.35 |
| Nine | 3.50 | 3.56 | 4.68 | 3.51 |

No significant differences in gain between grade levels, [illegible], or between those students [illegible]. [illegible] there was significant difference in gain between ninth grade students who were taught by a teacher of the opposite race and those taught by a teacher of the same race. At both seventh and eighth grade level, the number of students taught by an opposite race teacher was not large enough for reliable statistical treatment.

In summary, the effectiveness of the instructional modules for significantly improving newspaper reading skills of junior high school students, including those whose general reading skills were two or more years below grade level, again was demonstrated. While effectiveness of each

module individually could not be evaluated, observations of classes and reports of teachers offered no suggestions for further substantial revisions.

Reasons for success of the modules also are uncertain. It appears, however, that student acceptance of daily newspapers as a part of the real world is important. Reading newspapers seems to be seen as "adult" and becoming an adult is a valued objective of adolescents. The modules define desired behaviors very precisely, and the knowledge of expectations that are considered adult behavior appears to be found satisfying. Attitudes of students toward newspaper use appeared to be quite favorable. However, use of newspapers for fifty consecutive days, at least to attain a limited number of skill objectives, does not appear to be warranted in everyday practice anymore than does the extended use of any other method or material. Neither does it seem warranted to permit a student to complete his formal education without becoming as proficient as his intellectual capacity permits in learning to use newspapers effectively since they are the most adequate resource for his continuing independent education.

Footnotes

[1]Berryman, Charles. The Newspaper in the Elementary School: A Research Report to ANPA Foundation. 1972.

[2]Berryman, Charles. Improving Reading Skills. Atlanta: Atlanta Newspapers, Inc. 1973.

[3]The research project was conducted with the support of the Augusta Chronicle, Wilkes County schools, and ANPA Foundation.